

Climate bill dies in Senate

On July 22, Sen. Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, admitted something electric cooperative members have been trying to tell him for three years: Americans do not want climate change legislation if it means paying dramatically higher rates for electricity and other goods and services.

On that date, Reid was forced to abandon efforts to pass climate change legislation after failing to sway senators from both parties, despite 18 months of arm twisting. Instead, Reid says the Senate will now work on passing a modest energy bill that will focus instead on energy efficiency and the BP oil spill.

The move followed several earlier efforts to pass Senate legislation that also failed to gain traction last fall. Those efforts became mired in economic distress and scientific scandals that left many wondering if they can trust any of the science on this issue.

Since 2007, electric cooperative members have inundated Congress with messages urging lawmakers to consider electric bills as they debate the climate change issue. Through the electric cooperatives' "Our Energy, Our Future" campaign, more than 3.2 million messages have flooded House and Senate offices. This includes more than 748,000 from Missouri alone.

The messages all had one theme in common: Rural America cannot handle another huge rate increase. And they have made a difference.

As the debate on this issue has taken place in both chambers, electric cooperatives have had a seat at the table thanks to the messages sent in by members. In fact, when Missouri Sen. Kit Bond addressed the

Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee in November 2009, he spoke before a huge stack of postcards sent in by Missouri consumers.

Despite the setback, this issue is not dead, and your electric bills are not safe. The Environmental Protection Agency has said it will pass strict regulations that take affect in January 2011 if Congress does not act. These regulations likely will not have any compromises that would soften the blow to consumers.

And while some Congressional members do not believe the balance of power between branches of the government will allow EPA to wield its stick, others are more concerned.

Missouri's U.S. Reps. Ike Skelton and Jo Ann Emerson drafted a bi-partisan bill this year that would reign in EPA on the climate change issue. They believe letting EPA regulate carbon would result in a "Glorious Mess."

Their reasoning: unlike earlier efforts to control emissions of sulfur dioxide, there is no commercially viable option today to remove emissions of CO₂ from power plants. So utilities would be forced to buy expensive carbon credits to continue generating electricity from

coal, or switch to natural gas.

The problem? Consumers would ultimately pay for any carbon tax or cap-and-trade plan. And switching to natural gas would be extremely expensive because natural gas generation is two to three times more expensive than generation from coal.

Missouri's electric cooperatives are concerned about any legislation that would increase costs for members who are already struggling to make ends meet. Electric co-ops typically serve a population that is older, more likely to be on fixed incomes, more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be below the federal poverty level than their urban and suburban counterparts.

We believe that any climate change legislation passed must keep electric bills affordable and the power supply reliable. At the same time, climate change goals need to be achievable.

Please join us in keeping the pressure on Congress so that electricity will never become a luxury only the very rich can afford. Rural America witnessed that take place before electric cooperatives were formed.

We never want to return to those dark days again.

